

# Soldiers



THE ARMY'S

**BEST WARRIORS**

**2012**



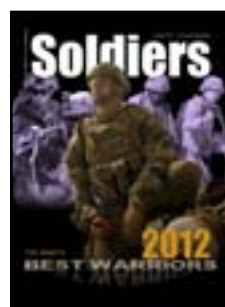


# Soldiers

January 2012 • VOLUME 67, NO. 1



Guided by new forms of technology such as hand-sized computer screens, Soldiers from 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, enter a military operations in urban terrain "insurgent"-occupied building at White Sands Missile Range, N.M. The scenario is part of the Army's Network Integration Evaluation 12.1, which took place in November, where approximately 45 digital devices were tested. The brigade is stationed at Fort Bliss, Texas. (Photo by Air Force Master Sgt. Jeremy Lock)



#### [ On the Cover ]

Soldiers from throughout the Army compete to become the noncommissioned officer and Soldier of the year. (Cover design by Peggy Frierson)

#### [ Coming Next Month ]

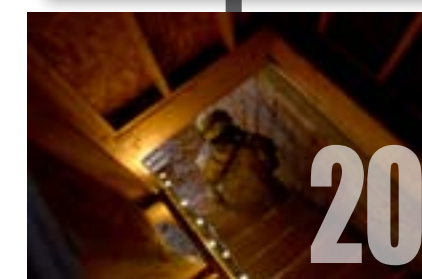
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University of Maryland ROTC cadets compare notes during the land navigation portion of the 2011 Ranger Challenge competition, held in October 2011 at Fort Pickett, Va. Considered the "varsity sport" of ROTC, Ranger Challenge also includes a physical fitness test, casualty assessment, weapons check, intelligence report and a surprise commander's challenge event that involves strength, intelligence and agility. The University of Maryland team came in second place for their brigade in 2011, but won the year before, going on to the international Sandhurst competition at West Point, N.Y. (Photo courtesy of the University of Maryland ROTC battalion)

## Features

- 4 **Best Warrior**  
Competition requires Soldiers to perform warrior tasks and leadership skills at the highest level.
- 14 **From 'Rocket Boy' to Vietnam**  
Combat veteran joins the NASA team and authors a book that becomes a movie.
- 20 **Developing the 21st-century Army**  
Soldiers evaluate computerized, digital systems that could give the Army a future tactical edge.
- 26 **Trucks to troops**  
Soldiers are amazed by the success of a remotely controlled device and its proven ability to save lives.
- 30 **Training Army leaders**  
ROTC cadets learn the art of war as well as academic skills.
- 38 **Soldier Ride**  
Project helps wounded warriors restore their physical and emotional well-being.
- 42 **Connecting America's youth with the Army**  
The Army gives the public a chance to experience the military and meet real Soldiers.
- 46 **This is my town**  
Soldier's hometown recognized for its support.



January 2012

# Contents





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## Soldiers

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Pfc. Travis Williams gives a hand signal to teammates just before they storm a dwelling. The house-clearing took place during the Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills portion of the Best Warrior Competition. (Photo by T. Anthony Bell).

# The fight to become the BEST WARRIOR

Story by T. Anthony Bell, for *Soldiers* magazine

**P**ERHAPS the most telling signs of the 2011 Best Warrior Competition were written on the faces and bodies of its competitors in the contest's final hours.

The stiff-as-a-board bearing and intense game faces that accompanied many of the warriors into battle were gone, replaced by the nursing of minor injuries, body language that spoke of exhaustion and deep, breathy sighs that pointed to a climactic end for the Army's "showcase" event, the Noncommissioned Officer and Soldier of the Year Competitions, commonly known as Best Warrior.

Best Warrior is a sergeant major of the Army-directed event that determines who best exhibits the core skills the Army deems critical to success on the battlefield, as well as the attributes that often accompany them. The five-day competition featured a written examination, physical training test and battlefield tasks like casualty evacuation and stress fire.

Fort Lee, Va., has hosted Best Warrior for eight of its 10 years. Twenty-six warriors, representing the Army's major commands in the Soldier and NCO categories, converged at the central Virginia location, Oct. 3-7. During the opening events, Soldiers appeared before a board, presided over by Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler. A grueling, multi-round combatives tournament closed the competition.

"It was very challenging," said Army Medical Command's Staff Sgt. Ilker Irmak just moments after the tournament. "It was also very painful. My feet are all hurt and blistered up. That's the price you pay along the way."





Once Irmak and every other warrior had expended a thousand muscle movements and millions of brain cells in pursuit of victory, the National Guard's Sgt. Guy Mellor and Spc. Thomas Hauser of Forces Command were announced as the winners. Both received Army Commendation Medals and other awards and will now represent the Army as ambassadors in a yearlong commitment that includes media appearances and special events.

Hauser, a military policeman who is training for an upcoming deployment, said Best Warrior is a tough competition but also a world-class training event that increases skills.

"Every Soldier should be proficient in the warrior tasks and battle drills," he said. "That's our foundation as Soldiers, and everything we did in this competition added to that foundation," which is what former Sgt. Maj. of the Army Jack L. Tilley had in mind when he established the event in 2002.

Tilley envisioned a standards-based competition open to all Soldiers that was designed to recognize the total Soldier concept and encourage participants to share lessons learned with fellow Soldiers. He also wanted to show the American public "just how good we are in the Army."

What began as a three-day competition in 2002 has evolved into a five-day event that requires Soldiers to perform individual warrior tasks and battle drills, as well as those that necessitate leading a team of Soldiers. In 2007, then-Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston directed organizers to better reflect the operational environments of Iraq and Afghanistan in the competition.

Staff Sgt. Raymond Santiago, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, creeps around the corner to get a better look at the scene during the Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills portion of the Best Warrior Competition. (Photo by T. Anthony Bell).

For example, land navigation, previously performed in wooded areas, was changed to urban warfare orienteering, focusing on navigation through city streets. Organizers also added a Humvee egress event and hand-to-hand combat techniques known as combatives.

First Sgt. LaDerek Green, Fort Lee Best Warrior operations sergeant major, said most of the current tasks are relevant to how the Army fights in Southwest Asia. Its battlegrounds, he said, demand that Soldiers not only be proficient at tactics and techniques, but also resilient and prepared to respond to ever-changing conditions.

"Best Warrior evaluates critical and adaptive thinking," he said. "Ultimately, it gives competitors a little insight into their abilities to lead in a combat environment, and provides them with the training and knowledge to become combat multipliers when they return to their units."

To ensure the competition achieves that goal, work on Best Warrior begins as soon as the previous competition ends. Soldiers from the Combined Arms Support Command at Fort Lee are charged with fulfilling the event's operational and logistical requirements. Army doctrine determines how events are structured, but it is up to the NCO leadership, led the past three years by CASCOM Command Sgt. Maj. C.C. Jenkins, to enhance the events in ways that are, he explained, "relevant, rigorous and realistic."

For example, in the past, Soldiers performed the weapons system maintenance task on a table under non-threatening conditions. During the 2011 competition, however, they

(Top right) Sgt. Guy Mellor, Army National Guard, jogs to his next point on the urban warfare orienteering course. This event was conducted in two parts: daylight and nighttime. Mellor went on to win NCO of the Year. (Photo by T. Anthony Bell).

(Right) Staff Sgt. Sean Swint, Eighth Army, bandages the arm of a casualty after she was felled by artillery fire at an airfield. (Photo by T. Anthony Bell).







(Left) Department of the Army Best Warrior competitors race down the track during the two-mile run event during the Army Physical Fitness Test portion of the competition held, Oct. 3, 2011 at Fort Lee, Va. The weeklong competition kicked off at 5 a.m. with a chilly and wet APFT at Lee Field. The APFT measures Soldiers' muscular strength, endurance, and cardiovascular respiratory fitness based on three events: pushups, sit-ups and a two-mile run. (Photo by Patrick Buffett)

(Above) Spc. Casey Hargaden, National Capital Region, holds Staff Sgt. Sean Swint, Eighth U.S. Army, in check during the non-evaluated combatives tournament. (Photo by T. Anthony Bell)

(Right) Staff Sgt. Raymond Santiago powers through the pushup event during the 2011 Best Warrior Army Physical Fitness Test, Oct. 3, 2011, at Williams Stadium, Fort Lee, Va. Santiago is a Ranger instructor assigned to the 4th Ranger Battalion, Fort Benning, Ga., and he is representing Training and Doctrine Command. (Photo by Patrick Buffett)



were required to perform the same task while “insurgents” attacked, an event that caught most of the warriors by surprise, including Sgt. 1st Class Raymond Santiago of the Training and Doctrine Command.

“That’s one task that everyone trains on every day,” he said. “I said

to myself, ‘We got this.’ But this one surprised me, and I guarantee you it surprised everybody else.” The element of surprise was a constant, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty that only added to the stress of the competition.

“Stress is what soldiering is all about,” Santiago added. “How do you

respond when you’re under stress? Can you use the snap decision-making process to make things happen quickly? Can you use common sense? That’s not in the book. That comes with experience.”

And the Best Warrior competitors, who ranged in age from 19 to 33, were experienced. Most wore combat patches and overseas service bars indicating multiple deployments. One NCO was

a former Best Ranger winner, another competed in Best Warrior two years ago in the Soldier category. Seven of the competitors were infantrymen, four were military policemen, two were cannon crewmembers and one was an optical laboratory specialist.

While they were all there to win and “represent their units,” as the Army Pacific Command’s Staff Sgt. Adam Connelly put it, or to learn “as much as

I can to take back to my unit,” as NCO of the Year winner Mellor said, some had more personal motivations.

Thinking about his mother and grandmother, who are both battling breast cancer, gave Sgt. Douglas McBroom, a cargo specialist from Army Materiel Command, “the strength to

stay motivated and to keep a positive attitude.”

He was also inspired by hundreds of roaring Soldiers, at Fort Lee for advanced individual training, who crowded the Williams Stadium grandstands, predawn, cheering on the contestants at the first event: the Army





Spc. Brandon Kitchen, U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command, gets set for the standing long jump event of the Army Physical Readiness Test. The APRT was a demonstration event and was not evaluated. (Photo by T. Anthony Bell)

Army.’ That didn’t register until we got here and (I) saw the SMA. There was a lot of anxiety.”

Other than a few on-the-spot critiques, there was no way for competitors to gauge their performances beyond their own assessments. Many embraced the idea that they were in competition with themselves, downplaying the performances of fellow contestants.

“I didn’t so much worry about the next guy,” said Connelly. “My goal was just to do the best I could.”

After the board appearance Soldiers had time to rest and prepare for the urban warfare orienteering events set for the next day and night, during which their objective would be to find points using a military map, protractor and GPS receiver.

“It’s attention to detail, paying

attention to the task, conditions and standards,” explained Santiago, a long distance runner who ran most of the time, and completed the day course in less than an hour. “The most important thing is to make sure you plot your points right the first time, because one incorrect point can throw you off big time.”

For example, some Soldiers covered more than 10 miles during the events, which put them at a disadvantage going into the fourth day, arguably the busiest on the schedule. It included casualty evaluation, countermeasure/improvised explosive device defeat and target engagement during urban operations.

Day four began with the casualty evaluation event. As soon as the competitors arrived on the scene, which mimicked an arrival/departure airfield control group on an airfield “in country,” simulated explosions and small arms fire erupted from the early morning darkness.

Soldiers had to quickly grab their

gear and move to areas near the aircraft, where they tended to numerous casualties on the tarmac. The scene was chaotic.

“That was an intense event,” said Staff Sgt. Sean Swint, the Eighth Army representative. “Everyone was relaxed, sitting on the bus and (then) the artillery simulations (went) off. They told us we had like five seconds to get off the bus, we ran out there and there were bodies laying everywhere. They had life-like blood; guys were screaming. It was shock and awe. I didn’t expect it.”

Over the next 30 or so hours, they were evaluated on convoy operations, chemical and biological attack reactions, immediate lifesaving measures performance and moving under fire, among others.

Competitors were provided with three subordinate Soldiers to perform their tasks and traveled in Humvee

convoys throughout a 3-square-mile area that represented an operational environment.

“We went down the lane in a Humvee, reacted to sniper fire and one of the vehicles broke down,” said Army Medical Command’s Spc. Dustin Edwards after the countermeasure improvised explosive device event. “So we had to go back, hook up a vehicle and roll out with it. It was very realistic, and it took me by surprise.”

About 100 role players, acting as villagers during elections disrupted by militants, were on hand to add the same realism to the urban operations event. Warriors had to apply their escalation of force training and other skills to navigate through the village, clearing houses, dodging sniper fire and dealing with unruly and sometimes disruptive townspeople to root out hostile elements. Successful completion of this exercise requires decisiveness and a cool

Physical Fitness Test.

“Having the crowd cheering me on — ‘Hey, go No. 1, go No. 1!’ — it really picked up my spirits and made me feel like a rock star,” said McBroom.

Green said that a strong start is critical to finishing the week successfully, because a sub-par performance on day one has the potential to throw off a competitor’s focus.

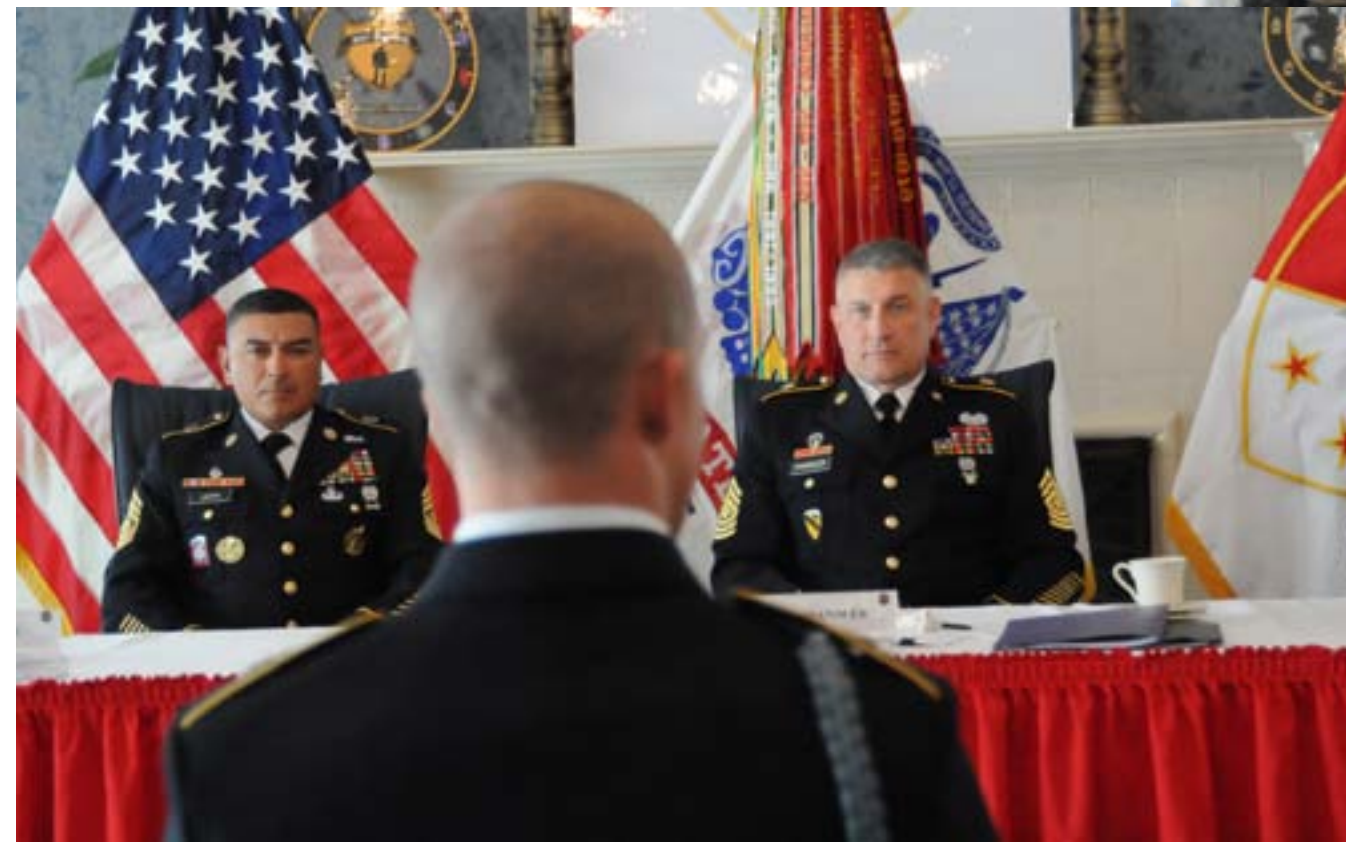
“It can set the tone for how some competitors will perform for the rest of the competition,” Green said. “One thing you don’t want to do is second-guess yourself. If you do that, you may find yourself in the middle of the competition trying to play catch-up with all the others.”

The board appearance was next. Clad in their Class A uniforms,

Soldiers were required to knock on the door, execute facing movements and respond to a litany of questions concerning current events and military subjects. The board members were not the standard senior NCOs, however. Led by the sergeant major of the Army, the panel included six top command sergeants major from throughout the Army.

“It was extremely overwhelming,” said U.S. Army Europe’s Pfc. Travis Williams, the youngest warrior in the competition. “Back in USAEUR, when I got put into the competition there, I thought about the USAEUR (command) sergeant major. That was intimidating enough, but I said to myself, ‘If you win this, you’re going to go in front of the sergeant major of the

During the board appearance, Best Warriors faced Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond Chandler and six other sergeants major from around the Army, who grilled them on their knowledge of military subjects and current events. (Photo by T. Anthony Bell)



Spc. Zachary Liermann, U.S. Army Special Operations Command, catches his breath after completing one of Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills at the 2011 Best Warrior Competition. (Photo by T. Anthony Bell)



head, said Command Sgt. Maj. James K. Sims, Quartermaster School command sergeant major and one of the exercise coordinators.

“In Iraq and Afghanistan, we depend upon small units, teams and squads, to clear these villages to get the bad guys out and make it a safe place for locals,” he said. “This lane is designed to ensure the leader thinks his way through the process while maintaining his calm under fire and stress.”

To further test the Soldiers, Sims and other organizers even added a scenario to the combatives event, which has been a part of the competition for several years in tournament form.

“What we had this year was a factory that has known bomb makers working in it,” said Staff Sgt. Kirk Hoxie, a combatives evaluator. “The warriors were told to enter the building and find the high-value targets. When they got to the high-value targets, they had to detain them, position them and bring them out to a detainee transport.”

This meant the warriors had to defend themselves from all directions using techniques best suited to subduing attackers; something Hoxie said is more practical than a tournament.

“Sometimes combatives gets a bad reputation because people are always trying to relate it to UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) and MMA (mixed martial arts),” he explained. “Even though it does have elements of jujitsu fighting, that’s not what it’s about. It’s about knowing how to defend yourself when your weapon malfunctions or when you can’t get to a weapon.” (The day did conclude with weapons qualification, though.)

After so many surprises, “I didn’t sleep well at all,” said Sgt. Brandon A. Kitchen of Army Space and Missile Defense Command, referring to the last night of the competition. “I woke up every hour expecting to be awakened.” His concern was the mystery event. Held on the final morning of the competition, it has gained a reputation over the years for being a shocker. In past years, Soldiers actually have been



Staff Sgt. Samuel J. Winslow, U.S. Army Special Operations Command, takes a break between events during the 2011 Best Warrior Competition. (Photo by T. Anthony Bell)

awakened in the middle of the night to perform tasks, or even egress from Humvees in total darkness.

The 2011 mystery event began with artillery fire and a mass casualty event, and included another stress fire lane, an additional escalation of force test and a uniform inspection.

The final event of the competition was a non-evaluated combatives tournament. Organized into several rounds, the tourney pushed the will of the warriors. Williams took a swig from a bottle of water after being eliminated, but didn’t want it to be over. For him, it wasn’t about gaining points but showing that points couldn’t define him as a Soldier.

“I’m sore and bleeding from all kinds of places. The combatives tournament was the last event so you kind of want to say, ‘Well it’s not evaluated, so let’s get it over with.’ But that’s not what it means to be a warrior. That’s not what it is to be in the Best Warrior Competition. You have to finish. You have to put in the

## BEST WARRIORS



Spc. Dusty Edwards, U.S. Army Medical Command, directs team members during the stress fire event. (Photo by T. Anthony Bell)



(Left) Sgt. John Colmenares, Eighth Army, barks orders to subordinates as they attempt to clear a house during one of the many Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills included in the event. (Photo by T. Anthony Bell)

effort no matter what,” he said, adding that he planned to share the knowledge he gained with the Soldiers in his unit.

“This is the pinnacle of all the competitions I’ve ever been in,” said Army Reserve Sgt. Christopher Couchot of Best Warrior. “I never thought I’d be competing against Rangers and Special Forces — the best of the best in the Army. It was pretty high-speed stuff, and it was so rewarding.” ♦

T. Anthony Bell works for Fort Lee Public Affairs.



# From 'Rocket Boy' to Vietnam

Story by Elizabeth M. Collins

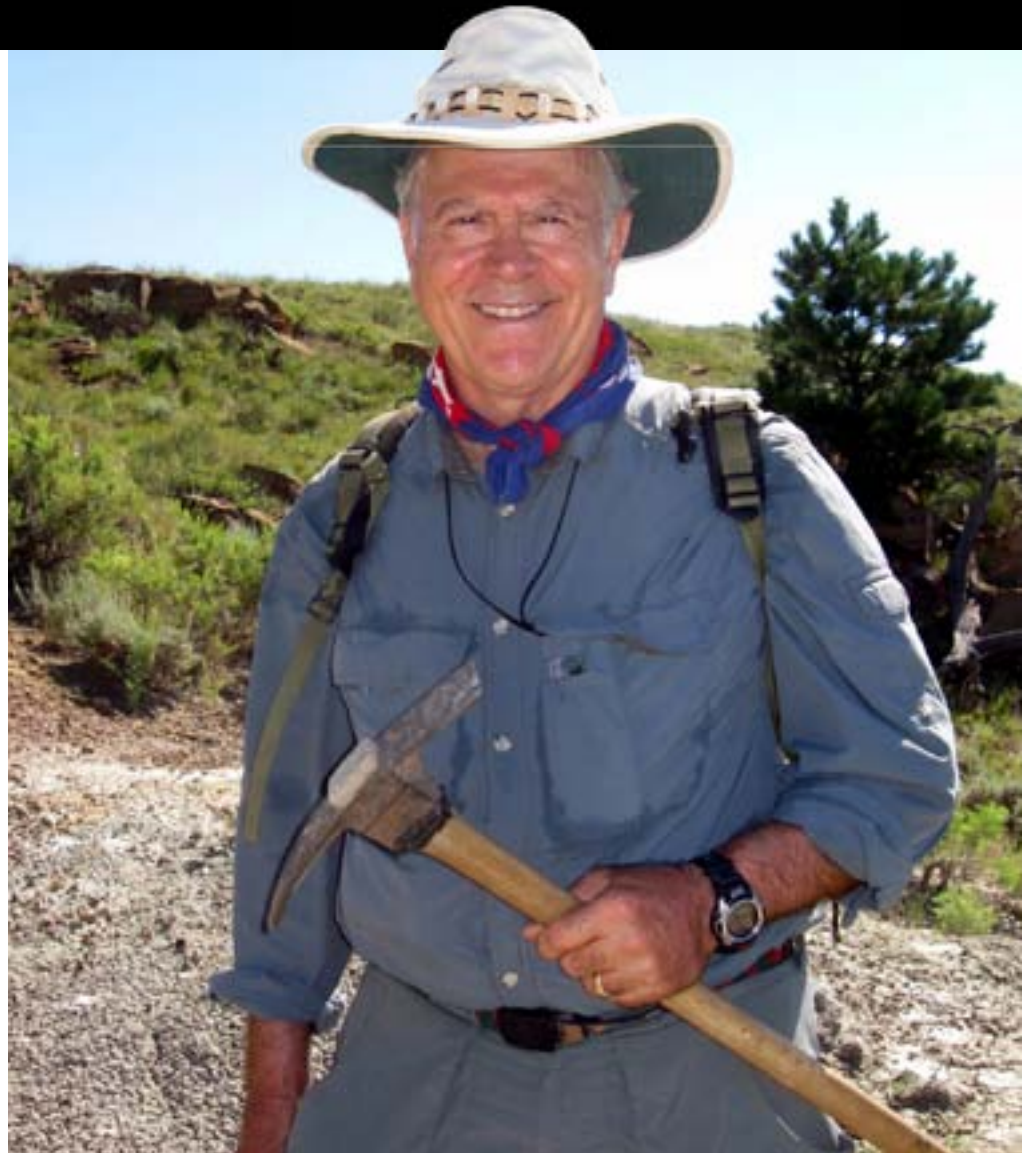
**W**ARS, according to author and Vietnam veteran Homer Hickam, should be fought by old men.

As a young man in the '60s, he was idealistic and eager to experience what he thought would be the adventure of war. But if someone asked him to go secure a hill today, he joked, he would just sit back and ask for another gin and tonic.

He knows what he's talking about. The former combat engineer volunteered for duty in Vietnam in 1967 as a first lieutenant. He found his adventure — a little too much of it — with the 4th Infantry Division in the jungles of South Vietnam's central highlands.

In late October of that year, intelligence reports suggested that the North Vietnamese Army in the area was moving the bulk of its regiments from the Cambodian border into Kontum Province, according to Allay W. Sandstrum in "Seven Firefights in Vietnam." On the night of Nov. 2, NVA Sgt. Vu Hong defected to the Americans and confirmed their worst fears, claiming five regiments were converging on a post known as Dak To and another camp at nearby Ben Het.

Sixteen American and Republic of Vietnam battalions and support units rushed to Kontum where they found an area that had been carefully prepared with expanded trails and roads, trenches, bunkers, tunnels and well-constructed defenses with overhead cover. The NVA also controlled much of the high ground. They wanted to annihilate a major American unit in an effort to force more U.S. troops to the highlands and away from the cities, which the NVA was already planning to



Vietnam veteran and author Homer Hickam takes a break from digging for dinosaur bones in Montana. Hickam credits Vietnam with instilling his love for adventure. The Vietnam Veterans of America recently honored him with the Excellence in Arts award. (Photo courtesy of Homer Hickam)

attack during the Tet Offensive, according to Lt. Col. Leonard B. Scott in his paper "The Battle for Hill 875, Dak To, Vietnam 1967."

A series of bloody engagements, known collectively as the Battle for Dak To, exploded the next day, and the United States lost hundreds of men attempting to capture hills where the North Vietnamese were deeply

entrenched.

Hickam had just arrived in Vietnam, and as an engineer assigned to Charlie Company of the 704th Maintenance Battalion, his job was to help keep the tanks and armored personnel carriers running. He didn't participate in the Battle of Dak To directly, but he had an excellent view of much of it.

"It was astonishing to see draftee

(Right) Soldiers lay down cover fire with an M-60 in Vietnam. According to Vietnam veteran Homer Hickam, during major engagements such as the Tet Offensive, every Soldier became an infantryman. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Center of Military History)



(Below) Then-1st Lt. Homer Hickam poses with one of the tanks he was responsible for repairing while assigned to Company C, 704th Maintenance Battalion, 4th Infantry Division in the South Vietnam highlands from 1967-1968. (Photo courtesy of Homer Hickam)



units fight so hard for those highlands," he remembered. "It was horrible. As soon as they started going up the hill, medevac choppers were just constantly going in and out. ... It was essentially a killing zone.

"What the heck had we gotten into?"

Next, Hickam headed to Blackhawk Firebase, which was just east of

Pleiku on Highway 19. Highway 19 was a strategic east-west route that ran from Qui Nhon on the coast to the highlands and the Cambodian border. The U.S. used the highway to convoy supplies from the port to troops throughout the country. The convoy trucks, including Hickam's M88 armored recovery vehicle, were frequent targets because the road was a favorite





Then-1st Lt. Homer Hickam takes a break during the Tet Offensive in January 1968. Oasis, the small firebase near the Cambodian border where he was temporarily stationed during the attacks, was almost overrun by the North Vietnamese. He said Air Force F100s based in Thailand eventually saved his unit. (Photo courtesy of Homer Hickam)



Then-1st Lt. Homer Hickam poses in his camp at Banmethuot, Vietnam, in August 1968. The mud, he remembered, was a constant problem and became a breeding ground for dysentery and malaria. Hickam earned a Bronze Star for his actions during an engagement in this large southern city. (Photo courtesy of Homer Hickam)

(Below) Soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade fight to gain control of Hill 823 during the Battle of Dak To, Vietnam. Dak To was a series of bloody engagements in November 1967 in the central highlands of South Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Center of Military History)



ambush site of the NVA and Viet Cong. They were very good, Hickam explained, at not only disguising mines and bombs along the roads, but also at concealing themselves in the vegetation that grew next to the highway. That was what Soldiers really dreaded.

Paving the road and cutting back the brush helped, but it didn't solve the problem. Hickam remembered racing to one ambush site in particular: It was barely five miles from Blackhawk, and along a wide-open stretch of road surrounded by rice paddies and farmland that they thought "was very, very safe."

Viet Cong guerrillas dressed as peasants had ambushed a company of the 54th Transportation Battalion. The Soldiers held the VC off until helicopters, tanks and Hickam's M88 arrived.

"It was an awful scene," he recalled. "Many trucks were burning, had been destroyed by B-40 rockets. When the cav unit ahead of us arrived, the Viet Cong were still attacking, and they didn't stand much of a chance against the armored units. When I got there, it was just like a scene out of the Alamo. It was awful. There were bodies everywhere, and some of the VC were still fighting. They didn't last very long."

It was unusual, Hickam said, because attacks in the highlands normally came from NVA regulars. He didn't know it then, but it meant the NVA had begun to reserve its troops for the coming Tet Offensive.

The enemy attacked major southern cities in the early morning hours of Jan. 31, 1968, ignoring a two-day ceasefire both sides had agreed to in honor of Tet, the lunar new year and Vietnam's most important holiday. By this time, Hickam was at Oasis, a small firebase near the Cambodian border. It was a brigade headquarters, but most of the units were in the field, leaving primarily support units behind.

The NVA marched into the local village clanging cymbals and gongs and announced they were there to take over, expecting the local citizens to rally to their cause. Because it was a holiday, and the ARVN had woken them earlier with celebratory gunfire, the Americans

didn't think anything was wrong when they first heard the commotion.

"They pretty well wiped out that little ARVN unit and then they turned on us," Hickam said. "We were kind of caught up short on it, and essentially we just turned into infantry for the day. We all picked up our rifles and went down to the perimeter, and the North Vietnamese kept charging up and getting into the wire and yelling and screaming and shooting. ... It was a pretty crazy day. We thought we were going to get overrun for a long time."

Air Force F100s finally arrived from Thailand late in the day and "kind of saved our bacon. ... The F100s were stationed at Myrtle Beach Air Force Base, S.C., which is where my mom lived, so I laughed and said 'Mom sent the F100s to save her little sonny boy.'"

Except for a few weeks in an old French Foreign Legion barracks, Hickam lived in temporary shelters for his entire deployment, either in a house bunker he'd built himself, or a tent, which could sometimes cause problems. Hickam's company moved south to a large city called Banmethuot in August, camping in a field that "quickly turned into a great, big mud hole," where many of the men came down with dysentery and malaria.

They were stationed near the 173rd Airborne Division, Hickam remembered, calling them a "'North Vietnamese magnet.' Any time you were around those guys, you were going to get hit by the North Vietnamese. They just followed them around. It wasn't real good to set up beside them because you knew trouble was going to happen. I don't know why they picked on them all the time, but they did. It was a rough lot to pick on. I would have picked on us before I picked on them."

They fought a number of small skirmishes and then the NVA chose to attack the section of perimeter Hickam's men were guarding. "Our wire was just filled with North Vietnamese. We fought them through the night." After Hickam radioed for air support, Cobra helicopters almost strafed them instead







Then-1st Lt. Homer Hickam takes a break in Vietnam. Hickam lived in tents like this one for most of his yearlong deployment in the late '60s with Company C, 704th Maintenance Battalion, 4th Infantry Division. (Photo courtesy of Homer Hickam)



Then-1st Lt. Homer Hickam poses on one of the tanks he was responsible for repairing while assigned to Company C, 704th Maintenance Battalion, 4th Infantry Division in the South Vietnam highlands from 1967-1968. These tanks were critical in keeping the roads clear for supply convoys and Soldiers. The east-west Highway 19, which Hickam served along, was a particular favorite for North Vietnamese and Viet Cong ambushes. (Photo courtesy of Homer Hickam)



of the NVA soldiers.

Hickam earned a Bronze Star for his actions that day, but it was also the day he realized that the war was affecting him more than he had thought. "It was clear to me that something had kind of gone wrong with me in a way because after that action in Banmethuot, we all went down to the wire and there were dead people down there. But that didn't affect me as much as the fact that we had also killed a little deer. I just broke down when I saw that. It made me wonder about my own sense of humanity, that I cared more about the deer. I don't think that was true. I think it was just that that animal was so innocent, caught in this crazy war, and all wars are crazy. All wars should be avoided."

When he returned home, he explained, he compartmentalized the war in a little box that he can take out if he needs to. It did give him a sense of adventure, though, and he swore he would never live a boring life. It was Hickam's inspiration for worldwide scuba diving expeditions.

After leaving the Army, Hickam went to work for the Army Missile Command as a federal civilian on the Hellfire missile program, and later, NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Ala.

"I loved it," he said. "Every day I worked for NASA, I woke up in the morning and said, 'Oh boy, I get to go (to) work for NASA today. How cool is that?' I worked in spacecraft design, principally an experiment module that went in the cargo bay of the shuttle called the space lab. From there I segued into astronaut training. ... I trained the astronauts how to work in space in their suits, and then also traveled all over the world working with scientists on building their experiments to fly in the space lab and then later the space station, and then training the crew to operate them."

Hickam retired from NASA in 1998 after publishing his second book, "Rocket Boys," a memoir about

building rockets as a boy in a small West Virginia mining town. The book was optioned as a movie titled "October Sky." He went on to write three other memoirs about his boyhood, a biography and six novels (a seventh will be published in April). He used his combat experience, he explained, in a World War II-era series, exploring how combat changes Soldiers.

"I can take my combat experiences that I had, plus what I know of other guys there (who) saw a lot more combat than I did," Hickam said. "I saw how their personalities became brittle over time and how they changed over time, and became almost exaggerations of their own personalities. That's what's happening to Josh Thurlow through 'The Ambassador's Son' and 'The Far Reaches.' We see Josh gradually spiraling downward although he doesn't realize it."

Hickam returned to Vietnam a few years ago as part of the International Institute of Education, a largely State Department-funded program designed to help educate Vietnamese students about America and the war, which he said isn't taught in Vietnam. Incidentally, he said we won the war thanks to young Vietnamese positive opinions of America. Hickam discussed the war with a Vietnamese writers' group, many of whom had fought on the NVA side, and "We all just kind of went 'What were we thinking?'"

He doesn't talk about Vietnam often, however, and hasn't written about it. He doesn't know if he ever will. "I just haven't gotten to that place yet. ... It's a lot easier to do when you're writing about a fictional character rather than about yourself. I've got it filed away somewhere, and maybe that's the last thing I'll ever write before I move on to the next plane of existence." ♦

**Editor's note:** Hickam was recently honored with the Excellence in Arts award by the Vietnam Veterans of America.

(Background) Soldiers push through elephant grass near Dak To, Vietnam, in November 1967, on the lookout for North Vietnamese soldiers or Viet Cong guerillas. According to Vietnam veteran Homer Hickam, Soldiers feared a direct ambush more than anything else. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Center of Military History)



# Developing capabilities for a 21st-century Army

Story by Michael Tolzmann,  
for *Soldiers* magazine

Photos by Air Force Master Sgt. Jeremy Lock

In the American Old West, some 130 years ago, a horseback-riding U.S. Army cavalry scout would cross a seemingly endless desert to relay hand-written battlefield information to his commander, with nothing more than a compass and map to guide him.

Fast forward to 2011: Soldiers of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, from Fort Bliss, Texas, stood in the vast wilderness of White Sands Missile Range, N.M., equipped with the latest forms of ruggedized communications technology, and in seconds shared critical battlefield information with commanders and dozens of others, located miles away across the desert.

For three weeks in November, the brigade sent approximately 3,800 Soldiers and 1,000 vehicles 45 miles northward into the New Mexico wilderness, to test and evaluate dozens of computerized, digital systems that could give the Army a future tactical edge, during an exercise called the Network Integration Evaluation 12.1, the second in a series of semi-annual evaluations designed to integrate and mature the Army's tactical network.

Brigade Commander Col. Daniel A. Pinnell said all of the approximately 45 systems under evaluation are potentially feasible, but that he is looking for candid feedback from his Soldiers — nearly half of who are seasoned combat veterans — to help the Army make smart decisions on which systems

are most viable. For his Soldiers to be tasked to see if these new systems work is “pretty cool,” he said.

“New technology such as this helps our communications and situational awareness for all our Soldiers on the battlefield,” said Pfc. Dustin A. Belshe, a cavalry scout with A Troop, 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, a subordinate unit within the brigade. This technology can help the Army from losing Soldiers and provide better communication between higher ups and the Soldiers on the ground.”

The NIE 12.1 priorities included working to extend the network to the individual Soldier on the battlefield, advancing mission command on the move and continuing to establish the integrated network baseline, Army officials said.

Soldiers here put their hands on the new forms of technology, learned how the systems work and replicated battlefield circumstances to determine how the systems would perform. From handheld devices that display detailed maps showing locations of individual Soldiers and buildings, to mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles equipped with mobile, secure “hot spot”-type transmitter/receivers that reach individual Soldiers scattered in the field, to Rifleman Radios that incorporate radio to radio to radio relay capabilities that greatly extend the range of hand-held radios, the hardware and supporting software tested here are cutting edge.

After receiving orders from his chain of command through a mobile digital system, a Soldier from 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, prepares to enter a military operations in urban terrain site at White Sands Missile Range, N.M.





“Most of the technology is ahead of its time. As scientists and engineers develop these ideas, the Army tasks us to use our training and experience to see if it is useful in a realistic environment,” explained 1st Lt. Eric V. Muirhead, executive officer of B Troop, 1st Sqdn., 1st Cav. Regt. “If we think this equipment has potential, it moves on towards full adoption, but if we don’t think it is worth it, the Army passes. This is both to save money, but more importantly, lives.”

“It’s an excellent opportunity for my Soldiers, and they take a lot of pride in what they’re doing here and take it very seriously,” said Pinnell.

Gazing upon a hand-sized computer screen with nothing but desert and mountains as backdrops, and a layer of dust visible on the screen, 2nd Lt. Adam E. Martin can share precise battlefield information with distant Soldiers and his chain of command the moment his team encounters an “enemy.”

“My role in this exercise is to test out a new system called Nett Warrior. It’s a specialized Android phone meant to help with situational awareness, planning processes, reporting enemy information and assisting with executing missions,” said Martin, a platoon leader with B Troop, 1st Sqdn., 1st Cav. Regt.

Just as in the harsh, mountainous, desert conditions found in Afghanistan, radio transmissions at White Sands can be difficult. The Soldiers conducted field operations and entered military operations in urban terrain sites, equipped with systems that nearly no one in the Army has seen, and subjected the hardware to the rigorous motions.

“Our primary focus right now is what the Army calls ‘the network,’” said Muirhead. Our goal is to develop systems that cut through the fog of war and give everyone, from privates to generals, access to rapid and accurate information and communication. The network has the potential to make even

the single rifleman a major player on the 21st century battlefield, allowing him to communicate to all levels, control unmanned drones and sensors, and even call for indirect fire or medevac at the touch of a button.”

While the brigade Soldiers put the new equipment through its paces, stopping just short of smashing the technology into pieces on the ground, they reported both positive and negative experiences.

“The way I am interacting with the technology is incorporating it in the different missions we conduct daily,” said Martin. “It can be frustrating at times because of technological hiccups. During missions, if the systems fail, it can cause the Soldiers to not want to use it, but this is all a part of our evaluation.”

“The new technology can help ... down the road,” added Spc. Colleen E. Pellish, a unit supply specialist with Forward Support Company, 1st Battalion, 35th Armor Regiment. “Testing it now and knowing the pros and cons can help to make the technology better for use in the future, or (lead us to) try something else.”

Specialist Scott R. Vitale, a mortarman with 1st Bn., 35th Armor Regt., agreed. “It’s nice to know that we help our brothers and sisters in theater by helping fine tune the new and upcoming technology.” ♦

Michael Tolzmann works for the Joint Hometown News Service at Fort Meade, Md.



(Background image) A Soldier from 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, creeps around a corner at a military operations in urban terrain building occupied by suspected “insurgents.”



The Rifleman Radio incorporates radio-to-radio-to-radio relay capabilities that greatly extend the range of hand-held radios. A small computer screen displays specific battlefield information that can be updated by Soldiers throughout the field.



2nd Lt. Adam Martin, a platoon leader with 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, collects information from a suspected “insurgent,” and instantaneously relays the details to his chain of command through a hand-held device. The 2nd BCT has approximately 3,800 Soldiers who spent three weeks in November testing and evaluating dozens of digital systems that could give Soldiers a future tactical edge, during an exercise called the Network Integration Evaluation 12.1.



An “insurgent” is detained by Soldiers from 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, at a military operations in urban terrain building at White Sands Missile Range, N.M.



### White Sands Missile Range, N.M.

1st Lt. Eric V. Muirhead, executive officer with B Troop, 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, observes battlefield movements and relays information to Soldiers from inside a mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicle. The MRAP is equipped with mobile, secure "hot spot"-type transmitters/receivers that reaches individual Soldiers scattered in the field. (Photo by Air Force Master Sgt. Jeremy Lock)



Story by Jacqueline M. Hames

**F**AMILIES worry when a Soldier goes off to war — it's natural. They schedule Internet chats and regular emails and phone calls to check in with one another. They send care packages to their Soldiers to curb any boredom and give them a little taste of home. There are well wishes and litanies of "be safe," which is about all you can say and do for a Soldier half way around the world. Or is it?

Ernest Fessenden, a software engineer and Rochester, Minn., resident, thought there was something more he could do for his brother, who is deployed to Afghanistan. So, he sent him a remote-controlled truck.

While the truck was a source of entertainment for Staff Sgt. Chris Fessenden and his fellow Soldiers, he also put the truck to use at vehicle

inspection points checking under carriages; it performed admirably. In August 2011, Chris loaned the truck to another patrol to inspect suspicious items along the roads.

"Instead of sending a guy up or doing anything else, they would just drop this little truck out and have it go take a closer look," Ernest said. "I was impressed the truck was still running, at this point it's almost four years."

"That's when he said one of the guys he loaned it out to, they came to a checkpoint, saw something suspicious, and so they dropped the truck. (They) used (the truck) to look for a way around it and they said it hit a trip wire and exploded."

No one in the six-person patrol was hurt.

"That was back in '07," Ernest said. It was the first time the dangers

his brother faced really hit home, and Ernest took an active interest in Chris' work as a Soldier.

"I asked him ... 'What do you do?' I understand he couldn't tell me everything, but I figured he could give me some rough guesses."

Chris conducted vehicle inspections, Ernest explained. He would get down on his hands and knees and use a mirror to look under vehicles, putting himself in danger.

"That concerned me," Ernest said. "If there's something there, he's right next to it! At the time, it was really in the news about the IEDs, the roadside bombs, and all that stuff, so we kicked around ideas. Is there anything that we can do that would make this safer, easier?"

Chris and Ernest discussed a few ideas, but most of them never took off.

Eventually, they came up with the idea of attaching a camera to a remote-controlled truck to look under the vehicles.

The truck was just an ordinary RC toy, found at a local store called Everything Hobby. Ernest bought the wireless camera from an electronics store, and found the receiver online. He asked Kevin Guy, the owner of Everything Hobby, for advice on how to hook up the camera and attached it to the truck.

No modifications were made to the truck to accommodate the environment it was about to enter. Ernest explained to his brother that he would have to maintain the equipment, using the manual as a guide. The camera, fortunately, was weatherproof.

"It was really just discussing with Chris the basics of what he does for his job to try and make it safer," Ernest said.

When Ernest found out that the truck had been obliterated in the explosion, he immediately returned to the hobby store and told Guy the story.

"(He) donated a truck right then and there, so I put that together with leftover camera equipment I had and mailed it to Chris," Ernest said.

Guy, amazed by the success of the improvised device and its proven ability to save lives, called local media and started doing interviews. The story quickly received national media attention. Ernest and Guy sent the second truck to Afghanistan, and decided that other units would benefit from having their own, so Guy helped set up a program to assemble more trucks. Within 30 days, Trucks to Troops became a full-fledged 501(c)3 organization ([www.truckstotroops.com](http://www.truckstotroops.com)).

"Our custom-outfitted trucks are deployed to offer Soldiers in the field

a quick and safe alternative to seeking out vital information," Guy said. "We use a mix of off-the-shelf components with cutting-edge technology." They decided to keep the configuration simple, just as they had with the first truck.

Simplicity, Guy explained, is sometimes hard to maintain, as people may want to improve upon the design and add things, but he and Ernest insisted the truck stay as basic as possible.

"We have a supply chain so we can actually produce this thing and ship

Trucks charge up in preparation for packaging and shipping at Everything Hobby in Rochester, Minn. The shop's owner, Kevin Guy, and Ernest Fessenden, brother to Staff Sgt. Chris Fessenden, founded Trucks to Troops, a nonprofit organization that sends remote-controlled trucks to deployed Soldiers. (Photo courtesy of Brad Churchward)



# Remote-controlled lifesavers





Staff Sgt. Chris Fessenden poses with the remote-controlled truck outfitted with a wireless camera that his brother, Ernest, sent to help with vehicle inspections in Iraq. When the staff sergeant went to Afghanistan, he loaned the truck to another patrol. The truck detonated a roadside bomb, potentially saving six lives. (Photo courtesy of Ernest Fessenden)

them out very quickly, and they're going right now to the right troops," Guy said.

The truck costs about \$500 to assemble and ship with accessories, which is relatively cheap compared to the equipment Soldiers regularly use. The trucks are funded entirely through donations, a grassroots effort.

"Trucks to Troops is really set up for parents and loved ones to donate these vehicles for more of a pin-point attack."

Ernest works with Chris, other Soldiers and anyone who has questions about the organization. He conducts demonstrations and talks to different groups about what Trucks to Troops is trying to do for Soldiers, while Guy conducts the business end of their effort. Their mission is to get as many of these trucks out to Soldiers as they can, as fast as they can.

Some people have expressed concern that Trucks to Troops is just sending toys to Soldiers, that they could never replace the equipment that the Army

provides, or the military training.

"We agree completely," Ernest said. "We're not trying to replace anything. We're just trying to give guys another tool, and if they can use it, great! And if (it doesn't work) for what they're doing, well, (they can) pass it on to someone else who might be able to use it. If nobody can use it, well, it's a toy: Play with it to pass the time."

Ernest hopes Trucks to Troops keeps going strong, but if donations ever lag, he hopes to release the information on truck assembly to Soldiers so they can put them together themselves.

"It's just another tool in the toolbox for them." ♦

**Editor's Note:** *At the time this article was written, Staff Sgt. Chris Fessenden was deployed to Afghanistan and unable to be interviewed.*



Trucks have been boxed, labeled and loaded for shipping. Trucks to Troops, a nonprofit organization, sends remote-controlled trucks to deployed troops. Soldiers use the trucks to search vehicles and roadsides for suspicious materials. (Photo courtesy of Brad Churchward)



# ES T O R Y

(Far right) David Houston, an ROTC cadet from the University of Maryland's Terrapin Battalion, practices employing a Claymore mine at the university's Chapel Field in College Park, Md., during a leadership lab in November 2010.

(Right) University of Maryland ROTC cadets compete in the commander's challenge portion of the 2011 Ranger Challenge Competition, held in October 2011 at Fort Pickett, Va. Considered the "varsity sport" of ROTC, Ranger Challenge also includes a physical fitness test, casualty assessment, weapons check and intelligence report. The University of Maryland team came in second place for their brigade in 2011, but won the year before, going on to the international Sandhurst Competition at West Point, N.Y.



Story by Elizabeth M. Collins

Photos courtesy of the University of Maryland ROTC battalion

## TRAINING LEADERS, ARMY STYLE

"I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same," 17 ROTC cadets from the University of Maryland swore as they raised their right hands in front of the

very Constitution they were pledging to protect. Some were combat veterans, but most were college freshmen, barely a week into their first semester.

It's an oath that has varied over the years, but the principles behind it — duty, loyalty, service, devotion, sacrifice — are older than the Constitution itself.

Those principles date back to 1775, when Colonial rebels first joined the burgeoning Continental Army, swearing their allegiance to protect and defend the 13 Colonies, and eventually renouncing their ties to King George III.

They're the same tenets Lt. Col.

Sam Cook, commander of the Terrapin Battalion at the University of Maryland, tries to nurture in the cadets from day one: "The first thing we try to instill in them is the Army's core values, making sure they understand the values, how that forms a basis of who a Soldier is, and how we try to live and uphold these values in everything that we do, whether we're on duty or off duty, or out executing a mission.

"What better place to do it than right there, in front of the U.S. Constitution?" Cook asked shortly before conducting the ceremony at the National Archives in Washington. He also holds battalion runs along the National Mall past war monuments, and takes the cadets on a tour of the Tomb of the

Unknowns and other parts of Arlington National Cemetery.

"We try to hit home with, 'I appreciate you making this commitment,' and then just starting at Arlington,



where those who have gone before us, our fallen heroes, have been laid to rest, using that to kind of signify the importance of their decision: 'Hey, here's what we're doing as leaders of our men and women, America's treasure. We want you to be the best that you can possibly be so you can make these great decisions.' Maybe one day, their decisions could prevent some type of accident or injury or even fatality."

"It's the biggest sense of pride I've had in my life," Cadet Austin Gillens said of the swearing in. Gillens is an Air Force brat, and many of his aunts, uncles and cousins are in the military as well. His recently deceased grandfather's dog tags are his most prized possessions. "You see all the people who have given their lives, and I know people who are veterans who have also given their time and their efforts to the military. So you're taking the same oath that (they) took, and you kind of feel the weight of it. And you have a lot of respect for everyone who's gone through the same process as you."

That's the exact response Cook, who in 2010 initiated the Constitution swearing in, hoped to garner. Sgt. John Donelson, a veteran of operations in Afghanistan, was especially moved, and he had already sworn a similar oath in basic training.

"I've always been very happy to be in the United States and enjoy the freedoms I've had, but coming from Afghanistan, I'm able to see that just the little things of having running water, having a way to manage trash removal — these very basic things that make our lives convenient — aren't actually true for (all) governments," he said. "That we have a system that allows us to be as free as we are is incredible to me. It just makes me want to go to work and do the best I can."

"This is something that's really in my heart, and when I see these documents, it really brings a sense of awe and inspiration. (It) makes me feel that I am actually doing something to continue what was started by our Founding Fathers ... the idea of having individual freedoms," he continued.

Prior-service cadets like Donelson,



(Left) ROTC Cadets Alexander Downes (left) and Derek Blakeman from the University of Maryland's Terrapin Battalion practice land navigation during Operation Fire and Maneuver, a field exercise held on Fort A.P. Hill, Va., in October 2010.



(Left) Cadet JoAnne Bistany of the University of Maryland ROTC battalion practices her rappelling skills on Fort A.P. Hill, Va., during a field exercise in October 2010.



(Below) Cadets Mariya Golotyuk (top) and Catherine Gonzalez from the University of Maryland's ROTC battalion practice water safety at the university's Eppley Recreational Center pool in College Park, Md., September 2011. When this photo was taken, Golotyuk was the cadet battalion commander. She also ranked as the top cadet in the nation during the 2011-2012 academic year.

who joined ROTC under the Green to Gold program, make up about 20 percent of the battalion. According to Cadet Command, Green to Gold benefits vary slightly depending on how many years of college Soldiers need to complete and their GI Bill benefits, but generally include tuition or room and board assistance, as well as a stipend for books and other materials. Soldiers with two remaining years of college or graduate school also have the option to remain on active duty and receive full pay and allowances while in school, or drill with the National Guard or Reserve under the Simultaneous Membership Program and receive a monthly stipend and sergeant pay.

Eligible Soldiers must: be U.S. citizens, and under age 31 as of Dec. 31 in the year they will finish school, have served a minimum of two years on active duty, have a minimum Armed Service Vocational Aptitude General Technical score of 110 and a cumulative high school or college grade point average of 2.5, have been accepted to college and the school's ROTC program, be eligible to re-enlist and have no more than three dependents. Division commanders can also nominate two deserving Soldiers for two-year Green to Gold scholarships each year.

Soldiers in the ROTC program serve as invaluable resources to their non-prior-service peers, said Cook, who is prior enlisted himself. He explained that cadets can turn to the Green to Gold Soldiers for guidance on everything from standing at attention to land navigation to what combat is actually like, and get different perspectives than the cadre's. "All the Green to Gold cadets know just so much that I don't know," added Cadet Diana Arbaugh, who plans to become a military psychologist. "They'll always come over and be 'Oh, you should stand like this, not like this.' I'm just absorbing it all right now."

Unlike Arbaugh, who began thinking about the Army as a junior in high school, ROTC was a longtime dream for Cody Hanse, who hopes to go into the infantry upon his commissioning. Finally getting his acceptance was



thrilling, as was putting on the Army Combat Uniform for the first time. “It was comfortable, actually. I loved it. I’ve been waiting to get it for so long, and to finally put the uniform on and look at myself in the mirror was a crazy feeling, but it was a great feeling,” he said.

“He looks good,” Hanse’s mother, Debbie, added before the ceremony, noting that he stood a little straighter than usual. “He reminds me of the little boy in the backyard when he used to ... play Army.” One of the things that impressed her most was that Cook and other cadre were always happy to meet with parents and go over the cadets’ commitments and requirements.

Besides meeting acceptance requirements at individual universities, ROTC scholarship recipients must be U.S. citizens between ages 17 and 26, with a high school diploma or equivalent and a cumulative GPA of at least 2.5. They also must score a minimum of 920 on the SAT (or 19 on the ACT), meet physical fitness standards and pass a medical exam. They incur an eight-year service commitment, with at least the first four on active duty.

The cadets are students first, Cook stressed, noting that the most important prerequisite to becoming an officer is to have a degree. The cadets still have to report for physical training at 6 or 6:30 four mornings a week, however – not an easy task for college students pulling all-nighters. They’re exercising “heart muscles,” Cook said, explaining that it “shows their level of commitment, their level of dedication.”

The hardest part about it, senior and Cadet Capt. Mark Thomas said, is actually getting out of bed – that and listening to other students complain about waking up for an 8 a.m. class when he’s up at 4:45 every morning. Thomas is a fitness nut, and was attracted by the Army’s emphasis on physical and mental toughness.

He received the highest overall physical fitness score out of about 5,643 cadets in Cadet Command’s 2011 Leader Development and Assessment Course. Thomas performed

(Below) Cadet Lawrence Hsieh of the University of Maryland ROTC battalion pulls security on the perimeter of a patrol base during a squad tactics exercise at Acredale Park in College Park, Md., in March 2011.



(Below) Cadet Chris Stenger from the University of Maryland pulls security during the 2011 Ranger Challenge casualty assessment in October 2011 at Fort Pickett, Va. Considered the “varsity sport” of ROTC, Ranger Challenge also includes a physical fitness test, weapons check, intelligence report and a surprise commander’s challenge event that involves strength, intelligence and agility. The University of Maryland team came in second place for their brigade in 2011, but won the year before, going on to the international Sandhurst Competition at West Point, N.Y.



(Below) Brian Ryu, a University of Maryland ROTC cadet, takes on “The Confidence Climb” during the obstacle course portion of Operation Indian Summer, a field exercise held at Fort A.P. Hill, Va., in October 2011. The goal of the exercise was to test physical strength and build self-confidence.



99 push-ups and 104 sit-ups in two minutes each, and ran two miles in less than 11 minutes. This makes him the top ranked cadet for physical fitness in the nation, which he said is “a pretty cool feeling.”

In addition, Thomas, whose dream is to lead a Sapper engineering platoon, runs the Army 10-miler each year and served as the captain of the Terrapin Battalion’s 2011 Ranger Challenge team. Considered the “varsity sport” of ROTC, Ranger Challenge is similar to the Army’s Best Warrior Competition and includes a physical fitness test, casualty assessment, weapons check, intelligence report and a surprise commander’s challenge event that involves strength, intelligence and agility.

The winner for each brigade (about 39 schools) goes on to the international Sandhurst Competition at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. Although the Terrapin team came in second in their brigade this year, they did win in 2010.

“It’s a lot of training, but it was really cool to be able to compete with teams from not only all over the coun-

try, but all over the world,” Thomas said of participating in Sandhurst in 2010. “There were teams there from Canada and England. I think even Chile had a team. I think Afghanistan sent a team. It was awesome just seeing people from all over the world compete in the same competition.

All of these opportunities and successes – unimaginable when Cook was an ROTC cadet – make it easier to recruit highly qualified candidates, Cook pointed out, noting that the most rewarding part of his job is watching the cadets grow as leaders and attain their goals.

“These kids come here with a sense of purpose and focus, laser-sharp focus. They know what they want to do,” Cook said. “They know where they’re headed, and doing Army ROTC provides a structure for them to enforce and develop discipline.

“They see this as something honorable, as a life’s dream. It’s a burning desire for them. You can see the fire in their eyes. ... You can see the excitement.” ♦

**Editor’s note:** For more information, visit the Army ROTC and University of Maryland Army ROTC websites at <http://www.goarmy.com/rotc.html> and <http://www.armyrotc.umd.edu/index.html>, or download the Maryland Army ROTC app on your smartphone. You can also learn more about LDAC in the July 2011 issue of *Soldiers* magazine at [http://www.army.mil/article/60767/Army\\_cadets\\_train/](http://www.army.mil/article/60767/Army_cadets_train/).



# ROTC

## IMMIGRANT CADET RISES TO THE TOP

Story by Elizabeth M. Collins

Photos courtesy of the University of Maryland ROTC battalion

MARIYA Golotyuk may not be a typical Army ROTC cadet, but as a hardworking immigrant determined to make a better life for herself and her children, she is what the United States is all about.

As a child of four in the Soviet Union, she was selected for the Olympic School for Acrobatics and competed all over Eastern Europe doing “flips and handstands in (her) sleep” while living first with her grandmother and later in a Soviet School for Sport dormitory. Then, when she was 13, an injury during practice left her in a hospital bed for five months. Doctors forbade further acrobatics, so she turned to tennis and academics.

Golotyuk lived in an “ugly block housing built by the state” in Kramatorsk, Ukraine — a “small, gray Soviet town polluted with factory soot.” When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, and Ukraine gained its independence, she had to go from speaking Russian to Ukrainian practically overnight to later qualify for a degree in math and physics at the Technical University of Kiev.

“Just one day we woke up and Russian literature was like a foreign literature,” Golotyuk remembered, comparing Ukrainian to a cross between Russian and Polish, which, as the child of a Russian mother and Polish-Czech father, she also speaks, along with Czech. “All the languages are pretty close. If you speak slowly, you can kind

of figure out what it is.”

She’s also fluent in German and English, although she didn’t learn English until a few years ago when she moved to the States to coach tennis at Trinity College in San Antonio, Texas, however, with its heat and wide-open plains, was a drastic change for Golotyuk, who was used to cosmopolitan, forested Europe, so she looked for a compromise.

Today, the single mother of two young boys is not only a U.S. citizen with degrees in economics and accounting from the University of Maryland, College Park, she’s pursuing a master’s degree in accounting. In addition, Golotyuk is a sergeant in the Maryland National Guard and her cadet battalion’s commander.

She also happens to be the highest ranked cadet in the nation.

“In ROTC, I started last year,” she recalled. “I went as enlisted in the National Guard and liked it a lot. It was really unusual for me when I heard that the military here is open for females, where in my country it is quite different. As a female you can actually move yourself forward into a leadership position, which is what I was looking for.

“ROTC worked perfectly for me. I looked at it while I was undergrad, but I ... didn’t have my citizenship. I had to wait five years. That’s why I joined as enlisted, just to see how it is, what it is. I got to basic (training) and loved it. The discipline was there already,” she continued.

Unlike many of her fellow cadets (who entered the University of Maryland as freshmen with ROTC scholarships), as a graduate student, Golotyuk will be commissioned with only two



(Above) Cadet Mariya Golotyuk, cadet battalion commander at the University of Maryland ROTC detachment, poses on the university's College Park, Md., campus. Golotyuk went from competing in sporting events for the Soviet Union (she's a native of Ukraine), to gaining American citizenship to enlisting in the National Guard to ranking as the top Army ROTC cadet in the U.S. — while raising two young boys as a single mother.



Cadet Mariya Golotyuk, cadet battalion commander at the University of Maryland ROTC detachment, hugs the school's Terrapin mascot in front of the stadium on the College Park, Md., campus. Born in a “small, gray Soviet town” in Ukraine, Golotyuk is eager to serve the country that has given her so much. Through hard work and perseverance, she earned the highest cadet ranking at Cadet Command's 2011 Leader Development and Assessment Course. She will branch military intelligence when she graduates from Maryland's graduate accounting program in spring 2012.

years of ROTC under her belt. She was concerned with fitting in and getting up to speed when she joined the battalion in 2010, so despite her full-time job and graduate classes, she signed up for as many activities as she could.

The color guard team, she explained, helped her give back to ROTC and the university, and she gained a big-picture understanding of what the military is about. While on the Ranger Challenge team (a military skills competition for cadets) she was able to bond with fellow cadets and hone her skills.

So when Golotyuk attended Cadet Command's four-week Leader Development and Assessment Course over the summer (crammed between two summer sessions of classes), she was looking to do something similar, to take advantage of every opportunity she was offered.

“Don’t just do whatever’s asked,” she said. “Just being a part of this group for the whole year last year and the opportunities — they give you stuff, but they don’t push it really into you. ... And they’re kind of ‘OK, you can do this.’ There’s so many things that they crowd the table with just for you to reach out and take it.

“When I went to LDAC, I figured out how much (more) we were prepared compared to all the other schools. We were doing extra land navigation courses, and all that stuff. I wanted to do as much as possible.”

Cadets, her ROTC commander, Lt. Col. Sam Cook, explained, are evaluated at the end of their junior years based on grade point averages, different leadership positions, physical fitness scores and land navigation and other military tasks from LDAC. Golotyuk knew her individual scores from each event, but Cadet Command had to compile the scores of about 5,643 cadets over several sessions of LDAC, so the rankings weren’t available until late September. Golotyuk was shocked to discover she came out on top.

“I came here and Lt. Col. Cook was looking at the paper, smiling all the way,” she remembered. (Forty

percent of Maryland’s graduating class of cadets ranked in the top 20 percent of all cadets, qualifying as distinguished military graduates.) “He’s like, ‘Well, congratulations. Number one.’ I almost fell out of the chair. I was like ‘Oh my God. What is he saying?’ I had a long day of work that day. It actually did take me a couple days to take it in. ‘Really? How did that happen? Oh my God.’ I was surprised. I was sitting at the table like ‘Oh, OK. Nice. Nice,’ thinking about my schoolwork, work ... and then people (who were in LDAC with you) start texting you because the results are published in other schools.

“They all started texting me: ‘Congratulations!’

“‘Thank you! Thank you!’ It was exciting. That week was really busy.”

As the highest-ranked cadet, Golotyuk was almost guaranteed her branch of choice, military intelligence. At press time, however, she was unsure if she would be able to change her original National Guard contract to an active-duty contract. She wants to, though. It’s her way of repaying the nation that has given her so much.

“I got to this country — I invested a lot of time working in U.S.,” she said. “I saw it give back to me, like right away. I spent a lot of time in my country. I competed for Soviet Union and I competed for (Ukraine). I did a lot of stuff, and then at the end of the day, they kick you out without even saying ‘Thank You.’

“When I got here, I wasn’t even planning to stay. But things worked out for me. People offered me to stay. They say, ‘We like the way you work. We need the skills. We need that.’ I went to school. I applied. I got a scholarship. From the givebacks that I got here, without having anything, that was my giveback. ... This is my way of saying ‘Thank you.’” ♦

**Editor’s note:** For more information about LDAC, look for the July 2011 issue of *Soldiers* magazine, or find the article at [http://www.army.mil/article/60767/Army\\_cadets\\_train/](http://www.army.mil/article/60767/Army_cadets_train/).



# Empowering wounded warriors to establish a 'new normal'

Story by Staff Sgt. Brooks Fletcher,  
for *Soldiers* magazine

**H**ALFWAY along a 24-mile bike route through the German countryside of Rheinland Pfalz, Staff Sgt. Barry Homberg took a break from pedaling to refuel and reflect on a journey that had been longer than the 11 miles he'd already pedaled that crisp autumn day.

Homberg's journey began almost five years ago with a mission in Ramadi, Iraq, that ended when two 7.62 mm rounds struck him in his right calf and hip. After spending 22 months recovering at the former Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington and an assignment to the Warrior Transition Battalion in Europe, Homberg was on his way to Trier, Germany, on a custom Catbike 700 recumbent trike as a participant in a rehabilitative cycling event.

"This opportunity is a building block to get me back on track to living

a normal life – a building block that will be with me for the rest of my life," said Homberg, a member of the Europe Regional Medical Command's WTB.

And although the Annapolis, Md., native will encounter many obstacles and challenges along his road to recovery, this is not a road he has to travel alone, thanks in part to Soldier Ride.

Soldier Ride is a Wounded Warrior Project initiative designed to help the newest generation of wounded warriors restore their physical and emotional well-being. Homberg and 47 other wounded warriors participated in the first European Soldier Ride in early fall. The event provided rehabilitative cycling opportunities to wounded warriors not only from the U.S., but also Germany, Georgia and Romania. Its goal was to help participants continue rebuilding their confidence and strength in a supportive environment.

Dan Schnock, director of Soldier Ride, said the principle behind the program is to serve as a catalyst to empower wounded servicemembers.

"The program gives them a chance to look at others with the same injury and say, 'If they're doing it, then so can I,'" said Schnock, who retired from the Army after 22 years. "The things they



used to do before their injury, like ride a bicycle, they can continue to do. And if they can continue to do that, maybe they can continue to do some of the other things as well. Soldier Ride helps wounded warriors learn what their new normal is in life."

According to WTB Commander Lt. Col. Michael Richardson, expanding the Europe Soldier Ride to include coalition partners was key to its success.

"That coalition partner that we have by our side in combat is just as important during times of recovery as they are on the battlefield," said Richardson. "It broadens the scope on how real this is and is a testament of the strong U.S. and coalition relationship."

Georgian army Senior Lt. George Arabuli said he appreciates the opportunity to take part in Soldier Ride and considers this part of a second chance at life. "I believe I am very fortunate to be here," said Arabuli, who lost his right leg after he stepped on an improvised explosive device during a dismounted patrol in Musa Qala, Afghanistan. "This is the best time for me. It's a time to focus and think about what is truly important to me."

For retired Staff Sgt. Dan Nevins, director of Warriors Speak, a WWP program that trains wounded warriors to share their stories as professional spokespersons, Soldier Ride not only helped him reintegrate back into society, but also became a way of life and a means for him to give back.

"Soldier Ride is a love and a passion. The Wounded Warrior Project is a family and a calling," said Nevins, who lost both his legs in an IED blast

Romanian Army 1st Sgt. Vasile Zbanca operates a hand crank cycle during the 18-mile ride around Lake Bostalsee during the Sept. 11, 2011, Community Soldier Ride held in Germany. In October 2010, Zbanca lost both his legs when his vehicle struck an improvised explosive device while convoying in Zabul province, Afghanistan. About 400 participants gathered on the final day of the three-day Soldier Ride to support the wounded warriors and remember the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Soldier Ride is sponsored by the Wounded Warrior Project and provides wounded warriors the opportunity to reclaim their confidence and strength through cycling. (Photo by Charles M. Belluomo)





Bilateral amputee and retired Staff Sgt. Dan Nevins, director of Warriors Speak, along with amputee and retired Marine Staff Sgt. Mason Poe, lead a group of participants across the finish line of the 18-mile ride around Lake Bostalsee during the Sept. 11 Community Soldier Ride held in Germany. About 400 participants gathered on the final day of the three-day Soldier Ride to support the wounded warriors and remember the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. (Photo by Charles M. Belluomo)

Romanian Army Staff Sgt. Marius Iovi and Soldier Ride manager Justin Lightcap ride a tandem bicycle toward the finish line of the 24-mile ride. In 2007, Iovi lost his vision and suffered severe burns and head trauma during an improvised explosive device blast in Tallil, Iraq. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Brooks Fletcher)



during convoy operations in Afghanistan in 2004.

“The WWP logo, one warrior carrying another off the battlefield, is significant to me,” Nevins said. “I started my journey as the warrior being carried and now I’m the one helping carry other Soldiers. I want to be there for them like this organization was there for me.”

Homberg also has plans to give back. Before reenlisting to stay in the Army “indefinitely” in September 2010, he became part of the Continuation on Active Duty Program, where he now serves as WTB cadre, helping other wounded Soldiers on their road to recovery.

“The process of recovery can be difficult and I want to be there to help them get through it,” said Homberg, who wears the round taken from his hip around his neck as a reminder of his own journey. “It is important that they have someone who knows what it is like and can help them every step of the way. I am making sure that these Soldiers are not forgotten.” ♦

Staff Sgt. Brooks Fletcher works for U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs.

# The Wounded Warrior Program and Soldier Ride

Story by Staff Sgt. Brooks Fletcher

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, more than 44,000 members of the U.S. armed forces have been severely injured during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan; this includes amputations, traumatic brain injuries and burns. Additionally, 300,000 servicemembers suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or major depression — that’s equivalent to more than 20 percent of active-duty military personnel.

Whether they suffer from PTSD or the loss of a limb, these wounded warriors need a great deal of mental, emotional and physical support to cope with these life-altering events.

The Wounded Warrior Project, headquartered in Jacksonville, Fla., is a nonprofit organization, established in 2003 to provide basic necessities and comfort items to wounded servicemembers returning home from Afghanistan and Iraq. Since then, the organization has transformed into a rehabilitative support network and a means of helping servicemembers recover and successfully reintegrate into the civilian world.

The purpose of the WWP is three-fold: To provide unique, direct programs and services that meet the needs of injured servicemembers; to help injured servicemembers assist each other; and to raise awareness and enlist the public’s aid for the needs of injured service members.

The project sparked the interest of Long Island, N.Y., native Chris Carney, who rode his bicycle more than 5,000



Staff Sgt. Barry Homberg, with the Europe Regional Medical Command’s Warrior Transition Battalion, is assisted on an incline during the 18-mile ride around Lake Bostalsee during the Sept. 11 Community Soldier Ride held in Germany. In December of 2006, Homberg was struck by two 7.62 mm rounds in his right calf and hip during a mission in Ramadi, Iraq. (Photo by Charles M. Belluomo)

miles and raised more than \$1 million for the WWP in 2004.

The following years brought more riders and supporters and continued to raise awareness, helping establish Soldier Ride, a program that provides rehabilitative cycling opportunities for wounded warriors to help restore their physical, mental and emotional well-being.

Soldier Ride is often the first experience wounded warriors have with the WWP, according to Albion Giordano, WWP’s co-founder and executive director, and it serves as a bridge to the other programs warriors use along their

roads to recovery.

“Although we are very big on adaptive sports and physical and mental health, economic empowerment is key as well,” said Giordano, a disabled Marine veteran. “You can’t just key in on one particular aspect, you have to take a holistic approach. If we can find a warrior employment, but don’t address his combat stress issues, how successful is he going to be? The whole key here is we want the warriors to successfully reintegrate back into society.”

For more information on the WWP and Soldier Ride, visit [www.woundedwarriorproject.org](http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org). ♦





(Above) Heather Ford tries her hand at the Wii surgery game in the Mission Support Battalion's Medical Operations Adventure Semi, or AS5, as her son Keegan looks on. The MSB showcased this vehicle and one other at the Army Ten Miler Expo at the D.C. Armory in Washington, Oct. 8, 2011. (Right) A Soldier with the Mission Support Battalion helps Keegan Ford navigate a mission on the AS5's flight simulator during the Army Ten Miler Expo on Oct. 8, 2011.

# CONNECTING AMERICA'S YOUTH

Story and photos by Jacqueline M. Harnes

**E**NGINES rumbled in the background as hundreds of people lined up to attend the Army Ten Miler Expo this past October. Vehicles from all across the Army lined the lawn of the D.C. Armory: Helicopters, semitrucks and Humvees all waited to be inspected by the crowd.

Among the collection of vehicles

were the Mission Support Battalion's "adventure semis," which are trucks equipped with a variety of simulators, games and information for patrons wanting to learn more about the Army.

"We're here to showcase the Army and give the public a chance to experience the Army and meet real Soldiers," Lt. Col. James Perry, commander, said.

The MSB, which is part of Army Accessions Command, supports

Recruiting and Cadet commands by connecting America's youth to the Army. The battalion was originally founded in 1936 when a small group of Soldiers was tasked to develop and man an Army exhibit at the World's Fair, according to the MSB website ([www.usarec.army.mil](http://www.usarec.army.mil)). In 1951, the U.S. Army Exhibit Unit was officially formed and assigned to the Army chief of information to take the story of the Army to the public.



## WITH THE ARMY

The battalion joined the recruiting family in 1971, and by 2002 it was in place under USAAC.

Perry added that there are four subunits within the MSB: The Mobile Exhibit Company, which is in charge of vehicles like the adventure semis; the National Conventions Division, which supports Army-sponsored conventions; the 113th Army Band, which provides musical support and community outreach; and the Contract Quality Assurance Division, which provides oversight to the contractors working with the battalion.

"We travel all over the country, in the lower 48 states, to educate and inform America's people what America's Army has to offer," Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth Baer said. Baer manned the Medical Operations Adventure Semi, or AS5, one of two vehicles at the Expo.

The AS5 contains a helicopter flight simulator, virtual recruiting stations, surgical Wii games, and the popular simulation mannequin.

"He breathes, you can get his pulse, you can get his blood pressure, you can do IVs on him and there are different wounds and things that we can put on that," Baer said of the mannequin. "That's the type of thing that we train on in the medical field for treatment."

He encourages visitors to interact with the mannequin so they can see how Soldiers train, and experience a little of that training themselves. Once they overcome being nervous around a mannequin that breathes, Baer finds that people interact more with the simulation.

The Ford family was among the first visitors to the AS5. Heather Ford tried her hand at the surgery simulation on the Wii, while her young son Keegan attempted the flight simulator.

"I was learning how to perform surgery, from cleaning to opening up and then bandaging it all back up," Ford said.

The Special Operations Adventure



Arthur Ford braves the parachute simulator on the AS2 during the Army Ten Miler Expo at the D.C. Armory in Washington, Oct. 8, 2011.





The Special Operations Adventure Semi, or AS2, waits for visitors on the lawn at the D.C. Armory in Washington, Oct. 8, 2011.

Semi, or AS2, contains unmanned aircraft, parachute and Humvee simulators in addition to recruiting kiosks, Sgt. 1st Class Abel Garza explained. The parachute simulator allows people to strap into a harness and hang from the ceiling of the truck, and virtual reality goggles give visitors the impression that they are drifting through the air.

Garza said that as a noncommissioned officer and mobile exhibitor, he serves as the public face of the Army to the thousands of visitors he encounters throughout the year. “Our ... motto is ‘Connecting America’s people with

America’s Army.” The training simulators, real world equipment and face-to-face time with Soldiers help bridge the gap between the public and its Army, and strengthen veteran ties.

“When I meet a lot of these people, especially the veterans, I really enjoy that. So when I share my experiences with them, you can see in just your normal civilian out there the interest they have and the questions they ask you, and how they appreciate the service that we have performed serving out country,” Garza said.

The MSB also provides recruiters a chance to showcase what the Army has

to offer in job opportunities and life experience, Perry explained.

For example, many places throughout the U.S. are not aware that the Army has a full medical department, including dental and veterinary services, Baer said. The AS2 and AS1 are there to help explain that the Army has more to it than meets the eye.

“The Army is more than what you see on the news,” Baer said. There are opportunities across many career fields, including arts and design.

“There are four things that the Army has to offer: leadership, educa-



Sgt. 1st Class Abel Garza guides a young visitor through the helicopter simulation.

tion, options and opportunities,” Baer continued. “That’s something that you will hardly ever find in any job across the country.”

One of the challenges the MSB faces is technology. The battalion has to stay abreast of technological developments to ensure it remains relevant and responsive to the commands it supports, as well as the public. Perry’s goal as battalion commander is to plan and assess technology and asset upgrades, and establish a robust social media presence to engage with the public and help tell the Army story.

“It’s really important that we con-

tinually update (the vehicles) so that when one of these young people you see walking in the door here goes in, that they see exactly what they’re going to be working with if they come and join our Army, not with what I worked with as a sergeant,” Col. Mark A. Rado, commander of the U.S. Army Accessions Support Brigade said.

The battalion will be acquiring a science and technology, engineering and mathematics vehicle next, which will be a high-tech, multimedia showcase, Rado said. He stressed that keeping pace with private sector tech tools is key to the MSB’s mission. It’s

also quite entertaining for the visitors.

“It was very cool,” Ford said of the various simulations. “I enjoyed it as well, but I’m probably older than the target market.”

Rado wants the public to know that the Soldiers of the MSB serve as ambassadors for the Army, illustrating what Soldiers do and why they do it.

“We’re out there touching (the public), along with recruiters, and engaging America’s public to hopefully have them either join the Army, either as (an) officer, enlisted or warrant officer, or provide help and support” as part of the community, Perry said. ♦



# This is my town

**SOLDIER'S HOMETOWN RECOGNIZED FOR ITS SUPPORT**

Story by Master Sgt. Doug Sample



**S**ERGEANT 1st Class Leo Hess, an Army reservist and firefighter, traveled all the way from Afghanistan to Washington, D.C., to show his thanks to the town of Gilbert, Ariz. for its support of the military.

Hess, on mid-tour leave in September, was on hand at the 2011 Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award ceremony, to personally express his gratitude to the people who cared for his wife and held his job for him while he was away.

In early 2011, while deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Hess nominated Gilbert for the Freedom Award, which recognizes exceptional support from the employer community. The town was among 15 organizations receiving the award, se-

lected from more than 4,000 nominations.

"I was just so happy to see them recognized because I never expected the nomination to get this far," Hess said. "It really hit my heart to be there for them and for the town of Gilbert to be recognized in this way. For this to be a small town and to be recognized for what they do, not just for (me), but for all veterans, was a great honor."

Around town, Mayor John Lewis said Gilbert's appreciation for its servicemembers and veterans is no secret. Each year the town hosts an array of activities on Memorial and Veterans days, and its Constitution Week (a patriotic event with military themes) has grown over the past 10 years into one of the largest fairs in the country.

And Lewis said the town rolls out the red carpet for each servicemember returning from deployment. Every welcome celebration includes flag-waving citizens, band music, proclamations from state officials and a police escort with flashing lights and sirens.

"It's been a very positive way of expressing our appreciation for those who served," Lewis said. "We are always looking at ways of thanking our military both while they are

servings and (when) welcoming them back. We have a community that is very patriotic, and we seem to have a strong feeling about that."

Hess, of Downey, Calif., shares the same feelings of patriotism and appreciation for the town he now calls home. He talks about how his coworkers stepped in to fill the void at home while he was away, and said he is even more grateful to the town for allowing him to keep his position as a firefighter with Ladder 255, even after he was called to duty twice in three years. There was a time when he doubted that would be the case.

For Hess, becoming a firefighter was a lifelong dream. He completed an associate degree in fire science before attending the firefighting training academy. He then went to school to become certified as an emergency medical technician-basic, pre-hospital emergency medical provider, all prerequisites for the job.

"It was something I always dreamed about as a kid," he said. "I love helping others. It's a hands-on job and that's how I am. I like being out there and working with people ... it's a lot of fun and rewarding."

Hess was an intern with Ladder 255 when in 2008 he got orders to deploy to Iraq. He fulfilled that commitment and returned to his job a year later. Hess had barely completed his job probation when his reserve unit called in December 2010 asking him to deploy again. With a second deployment looming, he feared his dream job could come to an end.

"It was kind of a shock because I had just got back," Hess said of the news. "I had only been home for about a year and they called and said they needed another person, and my name was on the list. I didn't know how my

(Left) Sgt. 1st Class Leo Hess, an Army reservist and firefighter with the Gilbert, Ariz., fire department, explains why he nominated the town of Gilbert for the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve Freedom award during a recognition ceremony at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington, D.C., Sept. 22, 2011. (Photo by Johnny Bivera)



(Left) Sgt. 1st Class Leo Hess and a Marine comrade, pose for a photo after a prisoner transfer with Afghan partners. Hess said he often shared the dozens or more care packages sent from the town of Gilbert with fellow service members in his unit. The care packages were just one of the reasons Hess nominated the Gilbert for the 2011 Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve Freedom Award. (Photo courtesy of Sgt. 1st Class Leo Hess)





Sgt. 1st Class Leo Hess, a reservist stationed in Afghanistan and firefighter with the Gilbert, Ariz., fire department, along with Gilbert Mayor John Lewis, and David McGinnis, acting assistant secretary of defense for Reserve Affairs, pose with the Freedom Award trophy during a ceremony, Sept. 22, 2011, at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington, D.C. The trophy was presented to the town of Gilbert for its support of Guard and Reserve Soldiers. Hess nominated Gilbert for the award as a way of thanking citizens there for supporting his family while he was deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. (Photo by Johnny Bivera)

**“As a crew, we admire and elevate him for his dedication to all of us here through his military service. ...”**

wife would take it, and I was worried because of my job situation.”

Although Guard and reserve Soldiers are protected by the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Act from job loss and pay cuts while fulfilling military obligations, Hess worried about having to face his supervisors and explain that he need to take another leave of absence, because once again, duty called.

It was at that moment that Hess learned how deeply committed the people of Gilbert are to its military.

“The first thing they said to me was, ‘How can we help you? How can

we help your family? What are some of the things around the house that you do that we can do for you?’” he said, recalling the words of his immediate supervisor, fire Capt. Mike Palmatier. “They weren’t bothered by (the deployment) one bit.”

“Keep in mind, Leo had only been back on the truck for about a year or so when he was asked to go to Afghanistan,” Palmatier said. “As a crew, we admire and elevate him for his dedication to all of us here through his military service. We all knew L255 ‘A’ shift just wouldn’t be the same without Leo ... but we supported him and his

wife in any way needed throughout his deployment.”

For the town of Gilbert, ensuring the Hesses were taken care of became a family affair. They were there when Hess’s wife, Tamara, had a minor traffic accident, and paid her a visit to see if she needed assistance getting her car repaired. Ladder 255 “A” Shift, along with other members of the Gilbert Fire Department, checked on her occasionally to see if she needed help around the house. They were there the morning after a late-night water main break and performed repairs at no charge to the Hess family.



(Left) Sgt. 1st Class Leo Hess, an Army reservist and firefighter stationed with the Gilbert, Ariz., fire department, and his wife Tamara, attend the 2011 Employers Support of the Guard and Reserve Freedom award ceremony, Sept. 22, 2011. (Photo by Johnny Bivera)

Hess said that while he was in Afghanistan, the town’s generosity continued. He received multiple care packages from the people back home. “They loaded me up with candy ... they kept the goodies coming this way,” he said. “They always asked me what I needed and were always putting together packages. They just didn’t do it for me, but always sent enough to share with everyone else. They wanted everyone to know they were missed and that someone was thinking about them.”

Lewis said the comments from Soldiers returning from duty in Iraq and Afghanistan have always been that they have few worries about home while deployed because, “We knew the town

would take good care of our families.

“That goes all the way from the typical things such as continuing differential payroll and health care benefits, if needed,” he added. “As I have talked to those who have come back, they have said it is the ‘little things’ that have meant the most.”

Hess, who was deployed when interviewed, said he could only imagine his homecoming. But he was certain there would be flag-waving, music and a police escort with flashing lights and sirens.

“It can be overwhelming at times,” he said. “They really go out of their way when it comes to showing their thanks and appreciation for the military.” ♦

(Below) Lt. Gen. Keith M. Huber, commander, Combined Joint Interagency Task Force 435, presents Sgt. 1st Class Leo Hess with the Bronze Star medal during a ceremony in Afghanistan. Hess traveled to Washington, D.C., in September to honor his hometown with the Employers Support of the Guard and Reserve Freedom Award for supporting him while deployed. He said the community’s support for his family while he was in Afghanistan allowed him to successfully do his mission.







# Take 5

*Walkin' in a Winter Wonderland*



- Alcohol use was reported in 48 percent of pedestrian fatalities in 2010
- High vehicle speeds contribute to pedestrian accidents
- Each year, about 5,900 pedestrians are killed and another 85,000 are injured in privately owned motor vehicle accidents
- Be alert when crossing the street; look left, right, then left again



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